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Shaping Culture Through an Understanding of Grace

If you were to greet any Ghanaian with a casual “How are you?”, you might be surprised to receive the simple expression “By God’s grace” as a response. In place of the common phrase “Lord willing,” Ghanaians affirm, “If grace permits.” Bakeries, car workshops, mini-marts, and more in my home city of Accra sport names like “Grace Alone Enterprises” and “Greater Grace Hospital.” By and large, Ghanaians understand grace to be God's divine providence and protection in the lives of human beings. Why is West African culture so perceptive of divine grace, and what can American onlookers learn from it?

The advent of Christianity in West Africa was initiated by Portuguese missionaries in the 15th century. Its influence spread swiftly over time—from 1900 to 2025, the number of Christians in Africa grew from 9 million to nearly 760 million. Christian values permeated West African vernacular, legal systems, and, most importantly, souls. Rose Korang-Okrah of Missouri State University conducted a study of 20 Ghanaian widows to determine the role faith played in their lives after bereavement. Many of these women faced legal battles over their late husbands’ assets and properties and, left with no source of income, relied on God’s provision. Repeatedly, in their testimonies, the widows cited God’s grace as their only dependable constant. “It’s God. It’s just by His Grace, [or] I wouldn’t have survived.” said one. Her words were a reflection of true gratitude, not empty prose. To onlookers, the hope and strength of these widows is inexplicable, given their circumstances. To the women and their communities, however, it makes

perfect sense. They understand the fragility of life, and recognize even basic necessities as a gift. What some would term extraordinary resilience, they accept as unmerited divine provision and protection—grace.

The rapid progression of this Christian movement in West Africa is reminiscent of the Great Awakening in 18th century America—and yet the attitude towards grace is so strikingly different between the two cultures. I believe this can be directly tied to the levels of philosophical and technological development in each culture. The Age of Enlightenment closely followed the Great Awakening, largely subverting the latter's influence and changing the scope of American religion forever. It prioritized reason and natural philosophy over theology. In the centuries following, intellectualism and skepticism have undermined the reputation of Christianity and challenged the existence of God. To a non-believing mind, there is no such thing as grace—only man's wisdom and effort. This is evidenced by the heightened reliance on technology and artificial intelligence in the Western world. Their basic needs guaranteed, first-world countries can devote their energy to first-world problems. The threats of war, starvation, and disease are thrust so far at bay that they become distant concepts, not worth the trouble of the thought one would give them. With every grand modern invention comes a new wave of confidence, and an inflated yet invalid sense of security. Men assume no need for God in the everyday dealings of life. Divine providence becomes a myth.

The tendency to disregard divine grace is not isolated to non-believers; in fact, it is most detrimental to those who call themselves Christians. American culture reduces the duties of church-goers to just that—attending church. Christians are expected to create a distinct separation between religion and 'real life'. This is simply and completely unsustainable. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," Paul

instructs in Romans 12:2. The incredible truth of grace should cause Christians to shift not only their Sunday schedules, but their habits and attitudes in every sphere of life.

The religious implications of living in a highly developed climate are clear: more reliance on man means less dependence on God. Deuteronomy 8:18 commands, “You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...”, while Psalm 127:1 promises that “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” A culture that does not honor God, seek His provision, and thank Him for His grace is destined to destroy itself. This must not be the case for America. In the last three years, there has been a slight but undeniable increase of Christians in America—signalling a reverse in decades of downward trends. These statistics are encouraging, but the rise of self-proclaimed Christians means nothing for the future of America if they do not apply their faith to the details of life. The grace of God is not so apparent in the ultra-modern efforts of the Western world as it is in the struggle for basic development in West Africa—and yet, American believers must make the effort to appreciate the providence of their Creator in everything they do.

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